

Dinner time!

Daily meals with your family taste great—and they're good for you.

By Anne Flounders

When Krista Scott was 5, her father taught her to make scrambled eggs. At 8, while making salsas and salads with her grandmother, Scott learned to use chef's knives. At 12, she set up a pretend restaurant in her mother's house, creating menus and preparing meals. Today, Scott, 18, is studying to become a professional chef at the Art Institute of California-San Diego.

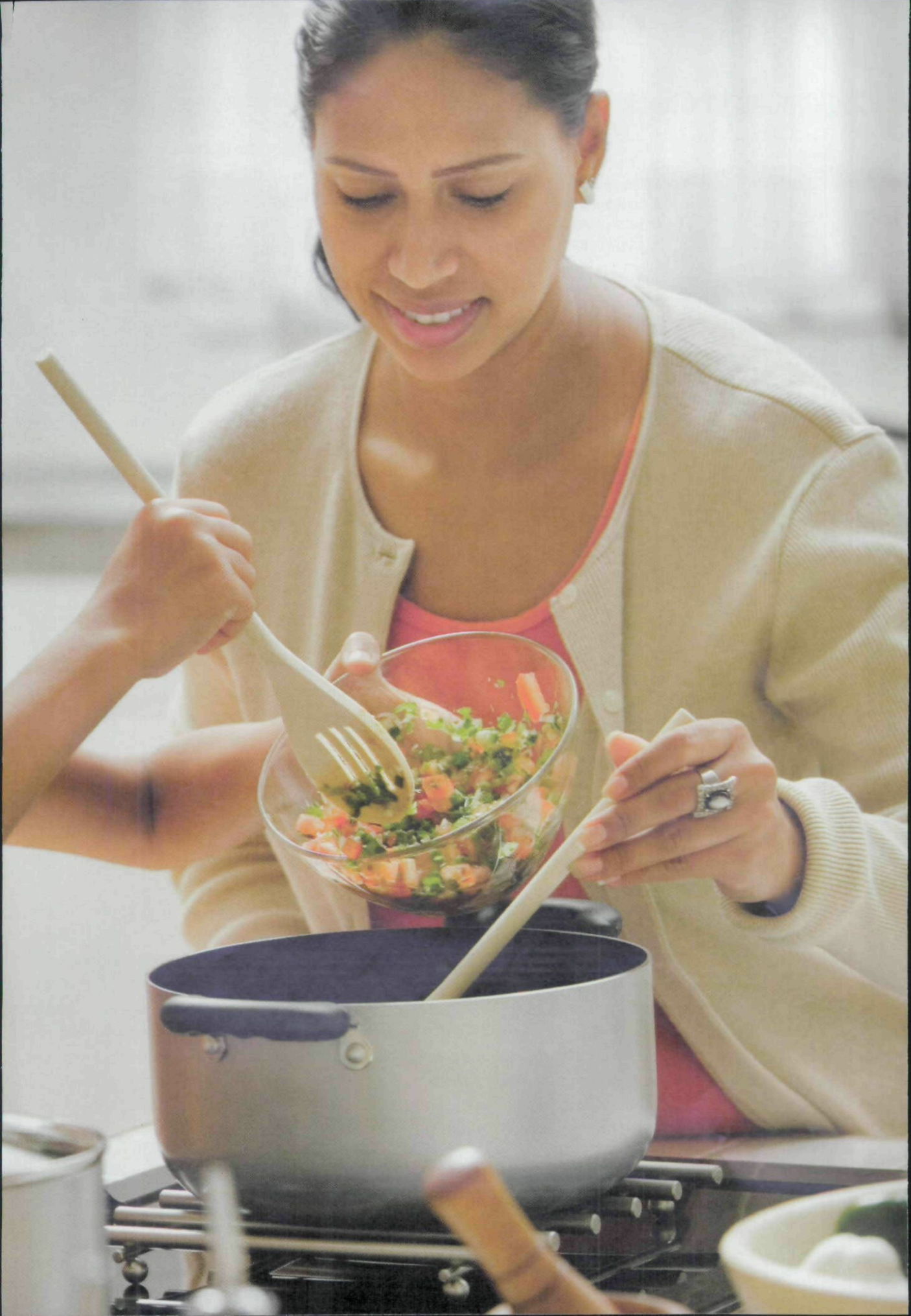
Dylan B., of Wisconsin, has been cooking with his parents since he was 4. "My dad and I would make stir-fries together. When I was older, he let me be in charge of the wok," says the 15-year-old. "I also grill chicken and steaks with my dad." Dylan's specialties include fish, chicken, steak, macaroni and cheese, and grilled vegetables. "No matter what we are cooking, I always add the seasoning," Dylan says. "My mom bought an electric salt and pepper mill for me to use. I like to mix up other spices so no meal is the same."

What do those two young chefs have in common, besides great cooking skills? They both make time for regular family meals. "Every day we eat a meal together," Scott reports. She believes that mealtimes with her family have strengthened their relationship over the years.

It's the same for Dylan's family. "We eat together every night at the dinner table," he says. "In the summer we eat outside on the patio. I usually cook with my mom on the weekends."



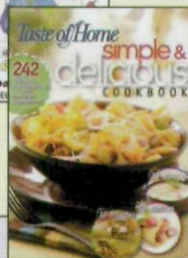
Jose Luis Pelaez Inc./Getty Images



Cookbooks to Check Out



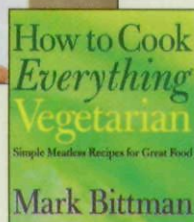
Clueless in the Kitchen:
*A Cookbook for Teens and
Other Beginners*
by Evelyn Raab



**Taste of Home Simple &
Delicious Cookbook and
The New Slow Cooker**
by Taste of Home Editors



Teens Cook:
*How to Cook What
You Want to Eat*
by Megan Carle and Jill Carle



**How To Cook Everything
Vegetarian and
How to Cook Everything**
by Mark Bittman

Scott and Dylan have the right idea. Not only do mealtimes bring families closer, but eating together at the dinner table is also linked to healthier lifestyles and success in school.

Benefits of Eating Together

When everyone in the family is busy, finding the time to share a meal can be hard. But that wasn't always the case. "Eating meals together has been a ritual for many years. It's only been in somewhat recent history that people have become less likely to eat a family meal," says Marilyn Swanson, a registered dietitian and spokesperson for the Children's Nutrition Research Center at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston. With busy school and work schedules, almost half of families don't eat together as often as they'd

like, according to a study by the Iowa State University Extension.

Yet studies show that making time to eat with your family can produce a smorgasbord of healthy benefits. Just consider these: **You'll eat more healthfully.** Young people who regularly eat meals with their families eat more fruit, vegetables, whole grains, and calcium-rich foods and drink fewer soft drinks than other people their age, according to a study from the University of Minnesota.

You will develop good habits. Family meals encourage "eating slower, as opposed to a grab-and-go meal," Swanson says. It takes 20 minutes for your brain to know your stomach is full, she says. Taking the time to eat more slowly can mean fewer calories taken in. Plus, Swanson says, families at home tend to serve healthier portion sizes than restaurants do.

You'll lead a healthier lifestyle. Teens who eat with their families five or more times per week are less likely to abuse drugs, alcohol, and tobacco, finds a study by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) at Columbia University.

You may do better in school. Teens in CASA's study who ate regular family dinners earned more A's and B's than students who ate dinner with their families fewer than three times a week.

You'll be a better communicator. Mealtime conversations have been shown to improve young people's vocabulary, according to studies by Dianne Neumark-Sztainer of the University of Minnesota. Chatting with your family about whether building a skate park in your town is a good idea has the hidden benefit of improving your conversational and thinking skills!

You'll be happier. The majority of teens—more than eight in 10—say they want to eat dinner with their families. Planning and cooking a meal is a great way to spend quality time together, talk, and create new memories. "There is always a little excite-

ment when we are cooking together,” says Dylan. “One time my mom bought some expensive fish and our dog reached up on the counter and tried to grab it. We wrestled it away from him.”

Scott also has fond memories. “When I think about one Christmas, I think about the huge meal we made,” she says. “You have memories to look back on, and it’s all around dinner.”

Making Meals Special

Experts believe it’s best for families to aim to eat at least five meals a week together. What can you do to find the time?

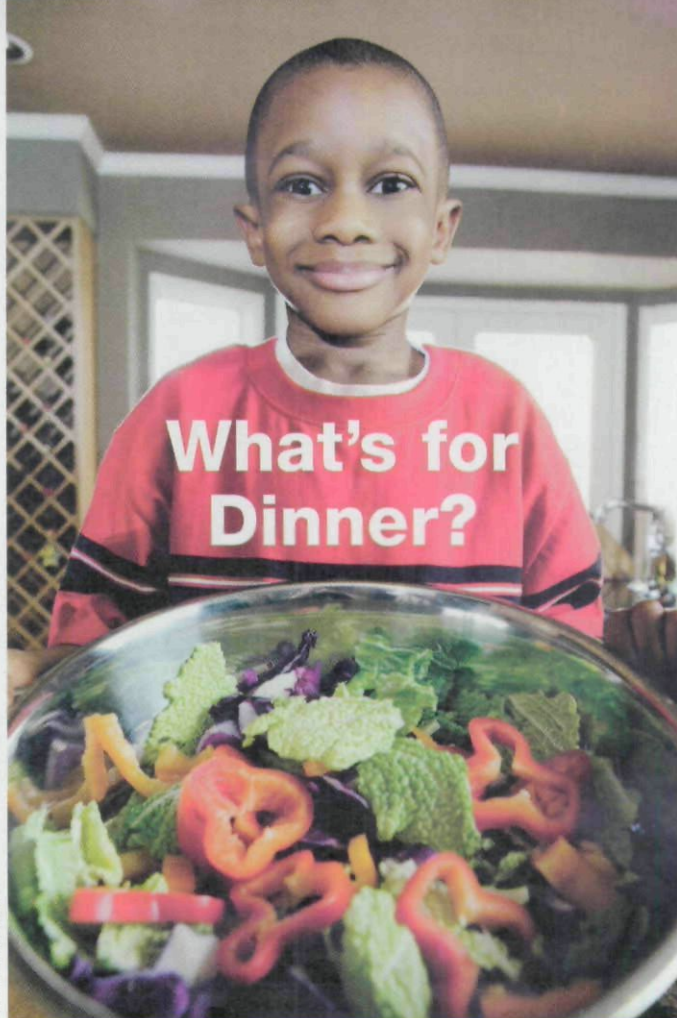
Planning ahead is key. On the weekend, schedule mealtimes for the week ahead. Choose menus and give each family member a job, such as shopping, food preparation, or setting the table.

View mealtimes as special events. Find unusual recipes to experiment with as a family. Set aside one night a week to set a particularly pretty table or serve a special favorite dish to encourage family members to linger a little longer around the table.

Trade TV time for meal time. Keeping the TV off also allows conversation to flow more easily.

Work with your schedules. When it comes to family meals together, “some is better than none,” says Swanson. Be creative: If you or a sibling have a football or soccer game, for example, others in the family can have a picnic together at the field. Or if a parent has to work a night shift, see whether you can bring dinner there and eat together during a break.

Eating together with your family is great for everyone. It’s healthy, it makes people happy, and if you get involved in the food preparation, it’s also educational. If you can barely boil water today, you’ll soon build skills you can use the rest of your life. “Volunteer to cook a meal and show off your skills,” says Swanson. “Be known for [your] chicken cacciatore!” **CH1**



ColorBlind Images/Jupiter

In a rush? Not a great cook? Here are a few simple suggestions for getting a healthy, tasty dinner on the table.

- Pick dishes that are easy to assemble, such as salads, soups, tacos, fajitas, or pasta. Divvy up the prep work among family members.
- Try using a slow cooker. Prep work is done in the morning, and the food cooks during the day. At dinnertime, a hot meal is ready to go.
- Have breakfast for dinner! Prepare eggs, pancakes, or French toast and serve with a fresh fruit salad.
- Try making pizza at home. It's healthier and less expensive than take-out pizza, and it's simple. You can buy pizza dough in the refrigerated section of your grocery store. Add your own sauce and toppings.
- Your local library probably has tons of cookbooks. Look for those that are aimed at beginning cooks, teens, or people in a hurry. Or if you're more adventurous, check out cookbooks of different world cuisines.

Copyright of Current Health 1 is the property of Weekly Reader Corporation and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.